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The Quay Brothers: Choreographed Chiaroscuro, Enigmatic and Sublime

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Source: *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Spring, 1998), pp. 2-15

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1213598>

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The Quay Brothers

Since the early 1980s, animation has received increasing attention from cinema and television programmers and is gradually being incorporated as a viable genre in film studies. The well-known Polish, Canadian, and Czech-dominated animation traditions have been expanded by a number of innovative British filmmakers, partially as a result of Channel 4's production policy, which provides independents with funding. Two animation filmmakers who have benefitted from this policy are Stephen and Timothy Quay, twins from the United States who settled in England over two decades ago.

The Quays are among the most accomplished animation filmmakers to emerge from under the Channel 4 umbrella. The striking decors and unique puppets they use in their films, their attention to the "liberation of the mistake," and their casual and lingering close-ups combine to create an ingenious alchemy of animated cinema. Watching their films means entering a dream world of visual poetry. In their own words: "Puppet films by their very nature are extremely artificial constructions, even more so depending on what level of 'enchantment' one would wish for them in relation to the subject, and, above all, [depending on] the conceptual mise-en-scène applied." The ambiguity of the world of their puppets has attracted a loyal if se-



lect following. Their technical and formal idiosyncracies both harken back to the long Eastern European tradition of adult animation (Jan Lenica, Valerian Borowczyk, Yuri Norstein) and introduce a new quality of poetry to animated cinema. Critics describe the Quays as revivalists, retro stylists, expressionists, absurdist with fetishes already clinically diagnosable in their student films (since lost), or as post-Kafka surrealists with Victorian Gothic spasms. Their works function at a tension between these and other attributes.

All of these descriptions seem to fit in their best-known animation film, *The Street of Crocodiles*, completed in 1986. The 21-minute color film (their first in 35mm) is based on the eponymous short story by

Suzanne H. Buchan

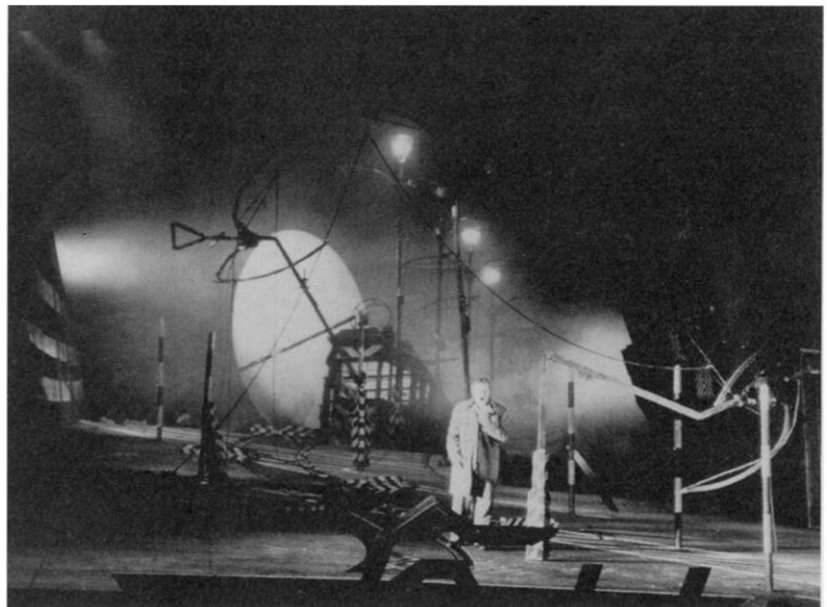
Choreographed Chiaroscuro, Enigmatic and Sublime

Polish author Bruno Schulz, who was murdered by the Nazis in the Drohobycz ghetto. The main figure is a male puppet, and the film records his wanderings through a maze of alleys, mirrors, and dimly lit shop windows. The hero is a fragile construction of the Quays' preferred materials: an oversize head roughly crafted of ravaged plaster, with eyes so liquid that their gaze is set in a permanent state of disorientation and longing; a tailcoat hung over a gaunt frame; and long, delicate hands so expressive that every gesture is poignantly helpless. Sometimes we follow his erring and cautious steps around miniature dust-caked street corners, sometimes the camera assumes his point-of-view, observing a metaphysical (and cinematically self-reflective) reassemblage of a dandelion clock or the resurrection of a cube of ice (shot frame-by-frame, projected in reverse). Then the camera is turned on his eye watching through a portal, another of the mysterious drawers, openings, and holes in the wall which dot the architecture of many a Quay film—windows and passages to subconscious desire.

In addition to their puppet films, the Quays' work encompasses animated shorts, biographical documentaries, and television station breaks (for Channel 4, BBC2, and MTV). They also design sets for theater and opera productions on various European stages (*Mazeppa*, *A Flea in Her Ear*, *Love of Three Oranges*; for a Peter Handke piece, *The Hour in Which We Knew Nothing of Each Other*, in Malmö; for a ballet in Copenhagen by choreographer Kim Brandstrup, a collaborator on their feature film; and for a Jonathan Miller production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at

the Almeida Theatre in London, among others). Other commissions include pop videos (their best-known but most un-Quayish collaboration was with Peter Gabriel on the Archimboldo sequence of his "Sledgehammer") and pop promos for Michael Penn and His Name Is Alive.

Numerous commercials are interspersed throughout the Quays' filmography as well. Animation has always held a special attraction for advertising because of its ability to compress ideas and create visual puns. Whether for computers, beer, or salted crackers, the



Quay Brothers' set for production of *Mazeppa*



Stille Nacht III

shadows, and a melange of artistic, musical, and literary tropes. Theirs is an instantly recognizable style, a shifting composite of chiaroscuro, an assemblage of obscure and fragmented nonnarrative structures. Their works are closer to music than to dialogue, closer to poetry than to literature, closer to interior monologue than to fictional narrative. Whether in art documentaries, animation shorts, or their recent black-and-white feature, *Institute Benjamenta*, or *This Dream People Call Human Life* (1995), their imagery obeys the enigmatic laws of their idiosyncratic cinematic universe: a synaesthetic palimpsest of music, literature, dance, and architecture; graphic design; the sacred and the occult; pathology and metaphysics. Unencumbered by narrative, the viewer can descend to various levels of bewilderment or enchantment.

In a literary analogy, the Quays' images, like James Joyce's later texts, resist syntactical classification; they belong to a realm of dreams which evades Freudian interpretation—complex and cunning, slyly evasive of the butterfly-pinning which some critics undertake in their dissections of art. The attraction of Joyce is and remains his absolute mastery of the history of literature which he parodied and pastiched; in the Quays' films, a respect for their sources and an inherent modesty is evident in the beauty of their labyrinthine references. Working in their chosen medium, they develop a Bakhtinian ludic principle which evolves from the intimate knowledge and selective appropriation of inspirational material. Joyce achieved expression of preverbal thought with linguistic inventiveness; the Quays manage to do so with the animation of textures and impossible spaces which their camera effortlessly traverses, intimating the secret relationships of spastic machinery, occluded mirrors, and fetishized dust. All this may sound too precious and adoring, but perhaps it is exactly because the Quays stir up mnemonics of sublimated and unconscious obsession, fever dreams, and psychotic moments that their films inspire either ferocious adoration or adamant rejection, depending on whether or not the films are invited to invade our protective consciousness.

The Quays' preferred authors and artists tend to be found in the direction of the cryptic, the lyrical, and the metaphysical: Archimboldo, Lewis Carroll, Franz Kafka, Max Ernst, Michel de Ghelderode, Bruno Schulz, Robert Walser (a Swiss writer known for his microgrammes), Joseph Cornell, or Robert Rousell

Quays' unmistakable style bends itself to pecuniary abuse without breaking. Their particular attitude to commissioned film invades some of their other films: in a letter to film critic Michael Atkinson, the Quays reply to his inquiry on the *Stille Nacht* series of related shorts made between 1988 and 1993:

They're all linked by the common thread of Black & White and the belief in oblique salesmanship. *Stille Nacht I* was selling steel wool. *Stille Nacht II* was selling ping-pong balls or socks with one vocation in life. *Stille Nacht III* was trying to sell pre-anamorphized reindeer dining tables with a bullet already fixed in one testicle (which even more accurately & obliquely explains the deformed antlers—documentary hyperbole). Of course none of all this is really apparent, but it gives us the sublime belief that no one is ever looking. And it's the premise we're most comfortable in starting from.

None of the *Stille Nacht* films are directly selling anything; they are either music videos in which the filmmakers have full artistic control (*Stille Nacht I, II, and IV*) or a short film which illustrates imagery and mood for the feature film when it was in planning stages (*Stille Nacht III*). But these remarks indicate the Quays' awareness of the unavoidable commercialism inherent in commissioned film, of the ravenous machine which needs its pound of consumer-digestible flesh. The Quays toss it a lump; it wedges itself in the gullet, persistently indigestible.

Watching any Brothers Quay film means entering into a complicity of furtive glances, choreographed

(a contemporary of Borges'). They are the retrieved ghosts of exile hovering out of frame in an afterlife of impotence, epiphany, paranoia, and despair. Exile takes on many forms: Prague-born Kafka's double existence; Walser's life took him to Berlin, Paris, and Berne, and eventually to Waldau (a Swiss sanatorium where he spent the last 20 years of his life); others lived a self-imposed inner exile. The Quays' work developed into homages to exiles from these inner regions whose texts are often reduced to simple descriptions of irrelevant or nondescript events which, in their foregrounding, posit uncomfortable questions about the purpose of existence. Their interest in Art Brut or the works of the schizophrenic texts and musical paintings of Adolf Wölfl (a Swiss peasant committed to an institution who rigorously drew, painted, and composed until his death), in Walser's microgrammes and in surrealist imagery all seem to be compacted into the graphic stylization and intricate textures of their films.

The influence of Eastern European culture on the twins' work is pervasive, whether it is the inspiration of animation filmmakers, composers, artists, or writers. After their departure from the United States, a middle European aesthetic seems to have beckoned them into a mysterious locus of literary and poetic fragments, whiffs of music, the play of light and morbid textures. Certain films can be considered homages to filmmakers whose work they admire (*The Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer*, [1984]), others present their own intuitive and visionary encounters with authors, artists, and composers. The animation filmmakers with whom they feel the deepest affinity are Russians Yuri Norstein (whose 1979 *Tale of Tales* remains one of the masterpieces of animation cinema) and Ladislav Starewicz, whose bug corpse *féeries* transform silent slapstick narrative into enchantment.

The Quays' amalgamation of the arts is one which vivifies dead or static materials in two ways: the obvious one is their use of the animation technique, which endows non-organic matter with the illusion of movement, an attraction which the form held and holds for artists; the other, far more subtle and disturbing and thereby shifted into the realm of poetry, is the synaesthetic effect of music and textures. Images of dust-cloaked objects pulled out of sleep are induced or accompanied by an underlying music which seems to be the expression and aural motivation of their animation. This combination of the uncanny and the sublime locates the Quays' works in an anachronistic cinematic Sturm and Drang (the Teutonic precursor of English Romanticism), yet it is impure, tainted by

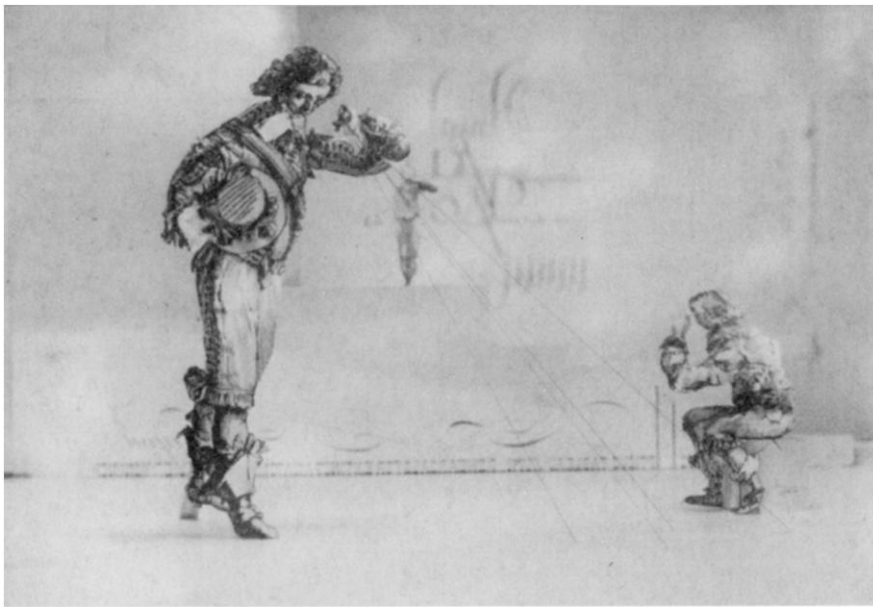
Surrealist gestures, an aesthetic of erotic psychopathology, and the hermetic machineries of medieval occult and pre-positivistic science.

Epiphany and Exile

The Quays were born in Norristown, on the outskirts of Philadelphia, in 1947. They enrolled in the Philadelphia College of Art, specializing in illustration, where their artistic predilections were encouraged with materials and excursions into the worlds of art. But it was their first encounters with Eastern European graphics and art-house film that were to provide early inspirational sources for their future films, all of which have been produced and executed in London and its environs. A copy of Kafka's diaries affected their concepts of art; there was also the screening of Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*; and exposure to an exhibit of Polish film, theater, and art posters at the College to excite their visual imaginations. And everywhere was music, music, and more music: Mahler, Sibelius, Bartók, and Janáček, who was later the subject of one of their documentaries for the British Film Institute. For the brothers, these artists created "a poetry of shadowy encounters and almost conspiratorial secretness," and they themselves are fresh conspirators in an ephemeral interdisciplinary genre of the Art of the Repressed.

The brothers' appearance (they have a preference for the shades, textures, and various states of disrepair typical of vintage clothing and early cinema) and the fact that they are identical twins tends to provoke curiosity about their private lives. In a letter to poet and librettist J.D. McLatchy they tongue-in-cheek a dream-list for critics, excerpts of which appeared in an article by McLatchy in *Connoisseur* magazine (April, 1989): "We [were] born of a heavily tainted family, neurasthenic, encephalitic, each one with an atrophied testicle, a sly liking for geese, chicken, etc., pigtailed in pillowcases," counterpointing this with a bio that reads like that of anyone raised in 50s America: "No, we grew up sweating with obedience. Our father was a 2nd-class machinist for Philadelphia Electric, our mother an impeccable housewife."

Initially, it can be difficult to tell them apart, especially since in their vocabulary the pronoun "I" is often subdued by "we." They call each other "Quay" and finish each other's sentences with an uncanny sense of a single mind with two voices (at least when discussing their films). This doesn't stop the conjecture on the origins of their intensely private universe,



*De Artificiali Perspectiva
or Anamorphosis*

it simply makes them more exotic when one considers how far they have departed from the middle-class clichés of America. And it becomes more interesting to know that Philadelphia has a large Jewish expatriate population, which might explain an early infiltration of immigrant European culture into their imaginations. Their own self-imposed exile to a midpoint between modern America and shrouded Eastern European culture is a continuation of a tradition in which identity is a composite of conscious choices.

Their first encounters with film and the kinetic possibilities of frame-by-frame animation began during a course at the PCA, where their student projects included live-action shorts and two cutout animation films. After graduation in 1969, their interest in European graphics brought them to London, where they enrolled in the Royal College of Art, continuing their illustration training and filmmaking: *Der Loop Der Loop*, *Il Duetto*, and *Palace in Flames*, all animation films, were made there. After graduation the twins returned to Philadelphia for an extended stay, waiting on tables and washing dishes. Book illustration provided little satisfying work; instead of the great European authors, their particular style attracted assignments for science fiction. Then a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts made a sojourn in Holland possible, where they designed book covers. During a visit to London, Keith Griffiths, a classmate from their RCA days, encouraged the Quays to submit a film proposal to the British Film Institute, which was accepted three months later. They moved to London and in 1979 made the prize-winning animation film *Nocturna Artificialia*.

This first post-RCA film foreshadows a number of motives and themes that continue throughout the Quay Brothers' later works: puppets enmeshed in disorienting point-of-view structures; hermetic interiors;

elaborate graphics; complex orchestrations of light and shadow; intertextuality; invocations of Eastern European traditions; declarations of homage, and sound tracks that both counterpoint and sustain the imagery. As in the majority of the films, the narrative in *Nocturna Artificialia* is unspectacular, even nonexistent: a solitary figure gazes out of his window, enters the nocturnal street, is transfixed by a passing tram, and suddenly, back in his room, falls from his chair and wakes up. The film is structured in eight sections identified by intertitles (in English, Polish, French, and German). In various states of epiphany and hallucination, the figure's somnambular wanderings are constructed by the formal treatment of the images (camera angles, spatial organization, focus shifts, and dissolves), and by the music and sound track which synthesize the characteristically disturbing tension. *Nocturna Artificialia* (1979), like *Street of Crocodiles* (1986) or *The Comb (From the Museums of Sleep)* (1990), deals with shifting levels of consciousness in which visual and temporal shifts are bracketed and further developed by shifts in the musical score and the sound track.

In 1980 the twins founded the Atelier Koninck studio in London together with Keith Griffiths as their producer (the odd name originates from a Dutch or Belgian beer label; the symmetry of the letters and its graphic design fascinated Griffiths and the brothers). Griffiths' undeviating loyalty to a



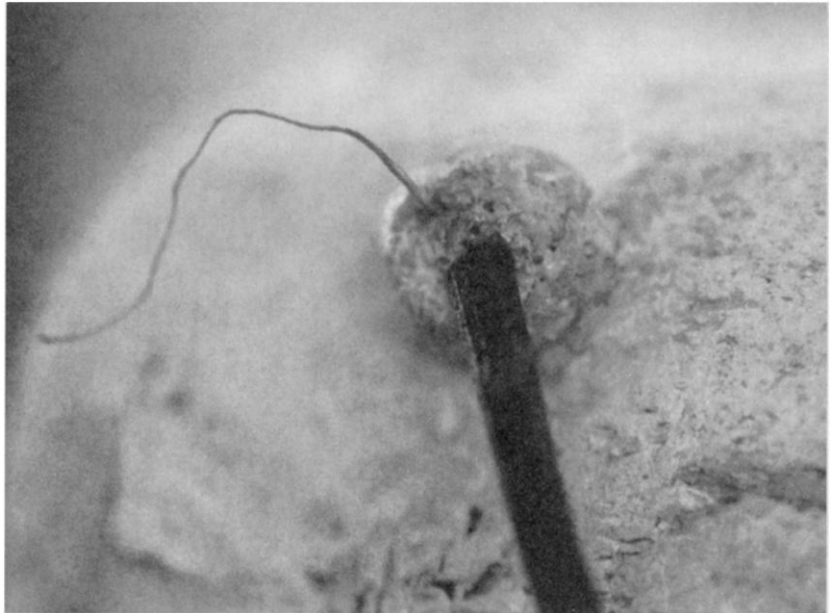
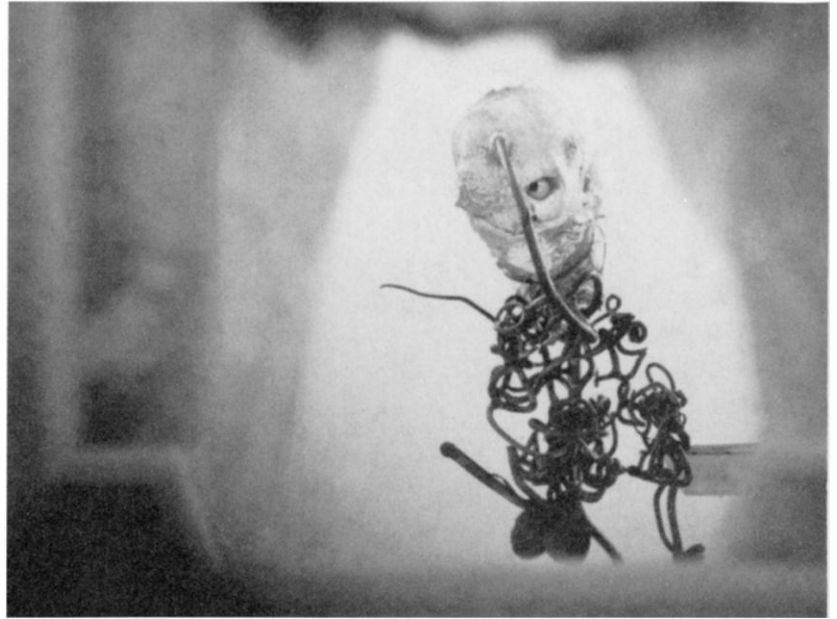
particular cinematic vision is obvious in his own list of productions (it includes Svankmajer's *Faust* and *Conspirators of Pleasure*) and the documentaries he has directed himself.

Griffiths' work with television channelled funding to Atelier Koninck. His dedication as a producer complements the Quays' hermetic work during the film-making process: shut up in their studio for over 18 hours a day, they immerse themselves in the miniscule world of puppet sets and armatures which they painstakingly animate frame-by-frame. Stepping out of the cold Dickensian bleakness of the South Bank district of London into the Quays' vast studio, a Baroque watchmaker's mausoleum which they call their living room, one enters a tactile atmosphere saturated with Kraft-Ebbing and Lenica, Kafka and Archimboldo, and populated by various objects left on their doorstep by admirers (a mummified pair of mice in wedding attire, bedded on the half-shell of an ostrich egg; a cone-shaped rat, retrieved long-dead and dessicated from the intersection of two slanting walls). Suspended by strings or collecting their own unique dust on shelves, the *generatio aequivoca* in an undead slumber, past and future constructions assembled out of crumbling pentimento fragments salvaged from various flea markets seem to lie waiting for their opportunity to slip into one of the films. Commodification of useless and alienated objects is part of the Quays' charm. There are moments when the time spent in their working space is almost indistinguishable from the experience of watching their films.

Calligraphing Space: Formal Aspects

Perhaps because of their work as illustrators, the Quays' films pay great attention to mise-en-scène and the marginal, and are more associative than narrative:

We demand that the decors act as poetic vessels and be foregrounded as much as the puppets themselves. In fact we ask of our machines and objects to act as much if not more than the puppets. . . . As for what is called the scenario: at most we have only a limited musical sense of its trajectory, and we tend to be permanently open to vast uncertainties, mistakes, disorientations, as though lying in wait to trap the slightest fugitive "encounter."



Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies

An example of their inventive cinematic graphic stylization is *Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies* (1987), a 14-minute film whose scenario was inspired by Fragonard's engraving *Le Verrou*. The film is a composition of camera pans back and forth between a sick room and another space whose white classicism is invaded by stark calligraphic lines which climb walls and traverse floors. The graphic ornaments escape the fixity of paper and course through the decors which they also define. Instead of embellishing the visual image, they become, as the Quays describe it, self-reflective "poetic vessels," drawing attention to the potential of animation to free the line and the geometric object from their static destinies.

One of *Rehearsals*' puppets—a pitted and deformed head perched on a tangle of metal wire with a single malicious eye fixed in a deranged stare—has a single long and coarse black hair protruding out of a soft mole on its forehead. Repelling enough in itself, but then in repeated close-ups a stick prods the mole in a circular motion which, after the second or third sequence, begins to have a physical effect on (this) viewer. The sense of discomfort and revulsion which this isolated gesture evokes is part of the film's fascination: both drawn to the neurotic repetition and relieved that it takes place on screen but not on one's own body, the viewer is freed to gaze at another's obsessive behavior. After a while, editing begins to con-

struct relations between these almost unbearable, dis-embodied close-ups. In another set, two puppets, strangely reminiscent in stature and gesture of the filmmakers themselves, one prone and pale, the other seated in an anodyne posture of sick-bed duty, wait—for what? Perhaps for the illness to run its (fatal?) course, perhaps not.

The tension is relieved by the Beckettian absurdity of the sitting puppet, who scratches his head in the same gesture as the wire homunculus's mole is prodded. It is precisely in this and other mechanistic repetitions that the "action" of the Quays' elliptic narrative takes place. And underlying the entire film, whispered monologues on the sound track hint at seduction or at disparate and disconnected interior monologues.

Technique and Liberation of the Mistake

The Quays work almost exclusively in 3D animation; puppets, decors, and *objets trouvés* are initiated in the cinematic metamorphosis which is the technique's quintessence. They are animated, brought to life, embedded in elliptical narratives and musical structures. The inherent possibilities of a form that enables the transcending of natural physical laws such as gravity, perspective, and the strictures of real time make film an obvious choice for artists interested in various concepts of perception, vision and its subversion, and the preverbal world of dream and inner voice.

Developments in technique, rhythm, and narrative complexity are found throughout the Quays' body of work, but except for a refinement in animating technique (the first films have the jittery pans which plague many animation films, but which are also a particular



The Comb

aesthetic of the animated form), their visual and musical quality is almost constant. Occasional formal irregularities have never irritated the Quays. On the contrary, in the process of shooting they let themselves be inspired by these “mistakes,” and go on to develop these errors into exactly what identifies their films: a lingering shot of an object or movement which first appeared inconsequential but is gradually transformed into the scene’s central motive.

The conscious eschewal of continuous space and a shifting of focus is further complicated by the Quays’ use of macro lenses, which provide virtually no depth of field. This results in a disorienting, staggered camera movement which, because it is not the result of a completed cut, draws attention to the single-frame process of dimensional animation. In most cases, the fast pan functions to disorient spatially, because the order and visual points of reference have often changed after the camera comes to rest. The lack of a full break between images, which is usually effected by a hard cut, results in an semi-elliptical connection between the initial image and the final one. All this contributes to a disconnected yet strangely coherent space seemingly free of established physical laws of reality.

Another technique of the Quays, which I call a fast pan shift (a pan being generally a movement within a visually established and continuous diegetic space), functions to establish different physical laws of vision in the animated realm. This is because of its unnatural speed of movement in comparison to more familiar, “invisible” camera movements which construct the fictional “reality” of most narrative. This results in a flicker effect and in rapid shifts which challenge concentration on planes of focus, making it almost physically impossible to focus on an object passing through the frame in order to implicate it (as it seems to suggest it should be) in the rest of the images. The Quays’ use of these techniques contributes to their particular architecture and their fluidity of space, drawing attention to its intentional fabrication. These and other complex and disorienting effects happen so quickly that there is no time to think about their painstaking evolution.

The Quays’ consistent use of focus-pull in, for instance, *The Comb* defines their concept of spatial coherence. The film’s diegetic world, a dreamscape of a sleeping woman—shot in live-action sequences which punctuate the film—is a melange of ladders, anamorphic landscapes, and painted backgrounds seamlessly constructed into a credible arrangement. A moving focal plane is implemented in uncanny point-of-view

shots and helps the spatial transitions between dreamer and dream world. The Quays also use what they term “retroactive cutting”: “We like to go the opposite way, do the close-up, where you feel disorganized, so you come back and see an arm.” This reversal of expository conventions of narrative continuity editing is another effect which serves to disorient, or to draw attention to the states of mind which are evoked, rather than obeying the conventions of seamless narrative.

Surrealism and Its Discontents

When asked about their own formal affinities, the Quays replied they feel closer to Dovzhenko than to Eisenstein. Their montage choices, perhaps ideally more similar to Dovzhenko’s sensuality, are linked to the Surrealist process of artistic creation. The Quays operate on conscious levels, but their earlier works in particular seem to bear traces of the Surrealists’ inspiration through the unconscious. Working on impulse rather than with carefully plotted narrative layouts or storyboards (which they would use “only at gun point”), the Quays create at an intersection of Dovzhenko’s emotional editing in silent films, of Eisenstein’s intellectual and associative montage, and of P. Adam Sitney’s description of “the surrealist hero [who] has chosen to live in the imaginative realm of displacement, fantasy, and mythopoesis.”

The earlier films of Stephen and Timothy Quay are also reminiscent of Surrealist cinema in their juxtaposition of image and sound. Their poetic syntax overrides to some degree the Surrealist insistence on disorder and disorientation, but the films contain enough Surrealistic references that critics tend to identify them as such. Yet unlike the Surrealists, who are criticized by some as being ignorant of the cinematic grammar and syntax which forms the essence of editing, the Quays’ films are often based on literary texts (Walser’s *Dornröschen*, the Gilgamesh epic, or Schulz’s *Street of Crocodiles*) and develop a form of narrative. Unlike the Surrealists’ use of automatic writing, which they insisted must evolve from chance and unconscious impulse, the Quays’ work with materials forces a tangible perception of the conscious processes involved in filmmaking, and relieves them somewhat of their reputation as Neo-Surrealists—a label they, incidentally, reject. Their application of familiar forms of cinematic artistic expression—music,



Street of Crocodiles

image composition, continuity editing, formalist montage, the puppet film and all its parameters—to works with ubiquitous Surrealist references is itself an indication of the ephemeral quality of the definition of Surrealist. The trajectory of the Quays' imagery is increasingly defined by their graphic abilities as illustrators and set designers (their name is usually under a long list of functions in the film credits, ranging from decors to lighting and animation).

Limits of Reality and Schulz's "generatio aequivoca"

The Quays have a predilection for rootless, abandoned materials. Their continuation of the *trompe-l'oeil* tradition of Max Ernst's metamorphoses, their use of dead matter mocking human form, and their underlining of the autonomy of material from human laws all seem intertwined in the challenge to animate and sensualize deadness. Puppet animation is by default associated with folklore traditions, investing puppets with an anachronistic distance. The Quays circumscribe the limitations of puppet theater by making direct reference to the materialness of their constructions. Armatures are visible, like tortured and crushed bones tweaking out of the crumbling fabrics which encase them, or are reduced to a single body part—a head, an eye. Close-ups, wipes, fades, and pans further alienate the puppets from the openness of a stage set, and we can enter into the privileged point-of-view of a figure which is impossible in a staged theater situation. And the concept of automatization treated by many authors—E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman," E.A. Poe's marvellous and psychotic transformations, Schulz's short stories, or Walser's automats—is found in Quay films as well. The experiences of the private moments of slumbering materials suspended in time is a theme throughout their work; and the concept of the automaton is of major importance in the new script the Quays are currently developing.

In each film they make, there is a practical division of labor: one of the brothers is responsible for the puppets, meticulously builds and animates them, the other operates the camera and arranges lighting (their roles vary from film to film). The sets themselves evolve in discussions at the other end of the studio, more often than not accompanied by a glass of wine and the omnipresent music which transforms the studio itself into the decor of one of their films. These sets are often included in displays at festivals, giving audiences the opportunity to see the relation between the screen world and the mechanical and technical investment required for puppet animation. For the Quays, these displays are not representative of the films:

They are in no way meant to be seen as finished objects when seen in isolation . . . out of

the natural context of the very films themselves. They lack entirely the further additional multiple potentials of sound, music, lighting, the choreography of rhythm and movement of puppets or objects through framing; and lastly, the interpretative mise-en-scène applied to all these. Retroactively, they are a reminder of the static imitation of the film's otherwise natural evanescent flux.

When their puppet figures are used to portray artists, as is the case with the television-commissioned documentaries and biographies, the historical figures are enhanced with gravity and humor by the puppet constructions which represent them, and by their "Mickey-mousing" to music. In *Leos Janáček: Intimate Excursions* (1983), for instance, the composite of a head made of an oversize bent portrait photograph and a floppy puppet body confronts us with an oddly burlesque death mask effect, yet also suggests clues to the inner life of the composer.

The porcelain dolls' heads which the Quays also use transport metaphoric and literary allusions, evoking writings from Descartes to Hoffmann, embellishing the fairy-tale basis of puppet figures; this is the secret life of materials on screen. A serial number imprinted on the back of a translucent porcelain seamstress's head in *Street of Crocodiles*, for instance, alludes to Nazi concentration camp tattoos and the brutality of Schulz's murder. In an uncanny reversal of disconcerting density, we understand what it is to be trapped in a sawdust and cloth physicality, and become privy to its sinister and sensual potential.

In their work with anonymous objects, the Quays demand that their machines and objects act as much if not more than the puppets: "[you] accept their very physicalities palpably as objectified dream or as music, and it's at this point that you can convey compound zones, darker ranges, deeper possibilities as well as perpetuate other narratives, other secret liberties." The visible constructedness of the mise-en-scène relaxes expectations of a cinematic equivalent of human life form, allowing metaphor and analogy to enter into the "otherness" of the objects. This is a cinematic expression of Bruno Schulz's *generatio aequivoca*, "a species of beings only half organic, a kind of pseudo-fauna the result of a fantastic fermentation of matter." The Quays' puppets become by extension their automatons, silently performing the routines and repetitions of daily life as materials manipulated and animated by the hands of their makers instead of a pen or a paintbrush.

The Conspiratorial Climate of Music

Music permeates a Quay interview and in the Koninck studio, music is folded into every gesture and reply. The studio's rafters are imbued with sulking and melodious compositions from various, predominantly Polish composers, with madrigals, violin sonatas, and avant-garde instrumentals. The Quays' relationship with Polish composer Leszek Jankowski is particularly important. It dates back to 1981, when they first heard his music and contacted him for possible cooperation on a future project. Working on both sides through translators, they sustained an exchange of letters over the following four years. When the Schulz project for *Street of Crocodiles* was approved, Jankowski (also an admirer of Schulz) began sending the Quays fragments of compositions he had written for them. "Thus we had all the music prior to the actual filming . . . the film grew from its interior outwards, with music more often than not being at the very core of the sequence, in particular, the film's finale: the elegant broken 'Automaton's Waltz' which had Leszek reading the closing lines of the Bruno Schulz story."

The Quays describe the initial work of image and music on this film thus: "We had already animated some of the sequences, then the music arrived and then we'd tighten or shorten or lengthen the scenes so that they would fit. We never said, Write a sequence for this, we said, Write six 30-second pieces; it was as vague as that. In a way it was such a vague thing [for Jankowski] to write; he'd never really done it before."

An analysis of the editing for most Quay films, including the early music documentaries, brings to mind the notes in a musical score. A combination of conventional editing and complex montage sequences seems to follow musical laws (for these are the moments in which the music seems to offer some guidance through the animated realm) and is an element of the alchemy of their films; the "liquid space" which, the Quays say, contributes to "the very slow accretion of layers which combine to line and perpetuate one another. For us, [Jankowski's] music offered a conspiratorial climate in keeping with the Schulzian universe which effectively suspended time and allowed the music to secretly contaminate the images, the images to contaminate the music." With regard to their editing process, the Quays think their impulse is much more a lyrical journey . . . the metaphors are always musical.

Throughout their collaboration, Jankowski's music has greatly inspired the Quays; the climate allowing reciprocal contamination of image and music results in "the music to be 'seen' and the images 'heard.'" This is a reference to visual music as described by Hans Richter and other "absolute filmmakers" of the experimental and avant-garde film movement that began in Germany in the 20s, who also worked with animated film form. In the Quays' *Igor—The Paris Years chez Pleyel* (1982), a biographical study of Stravinsky, parts of flashing neon signs light up in sequence to finally form a strangely familiar image—the curves and forms are reminiscent of Viking Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony* (1921-24), an avant-garde "absolute" film which itself was based on a detailed score of abstract geometric forms.

The almost complete lack of spoken dialogue in the Quays' animated works (which, if on the sound track at all, is muffled or whispered so quietly as to be unintelligible, even discordant, indicating only some obscure presence) allows or even forces one to give oneself entirely up to the images and to the music. The Quays: "For us, dialogue is no more important than light or sound—it is one of the elements you can play with—the trouble is, it is always the most obvious. In Hollywood, dialogue is preeminent; the script comes first . . . that gets the funding. And for us it is always the other way around." In *The Comb*, the film is arranged in what the Quays call a "dream syntax," with analogous gestures and cutting between the live action and animation sequences. The erratic movement of the sleeping woman's twitching finger is repeated by a puppet's overly long middle finger, and careful crosscutting between these shots suggests a relation between the sleeper and the puppet. Here the language is a murmur, functioning like an aural breeze of the sleeper's disturbances.

The Koninck studio is filled with bookshelves weighted down by antiquaria and paperbacks whose covers have been appropriated by the twins' initial graphic vocation. Leafing through them one finds again and again references to early optical studies and kabbalistic science: *Magica naturalis*, for example, a Counter-Enlightenment metaphysical concept of vision, perception, and art which informs the metamorphoses and occluded vision the Quays conjure with their camera work. Their *De Artificiali Perspectiva or Anamorphosis* (1990), a film-historical documentary on the eponymous technique of subverting vision, deals with these concepts. Perhaps the cinema, and es-

pecially the metaphysical potential of animation film, is the art form most able to investigate these 16th- and 17th-century magical and occult investigations.

Some visionaries of current cinema, from Kusturica to Ruiz and von Trier, incorporate romantic, even kitschy, imagery and animated sequences in their films to express these inner sensibilities. The fantastic is no longer decorative, but has become a serious aesthetic means to express a visual correlation to the dissolving borders between reality and virtuality, between natural physical laws and the increasingly seamless inclusion of fantasy as a given in fictional realism.

The Quays understand the fantastic in terms of the sublime or the marvellous as Todorov defines it. "If you're thrown too much into the fantastic, so that you lose all handhold," they say, "then it defeats you. In a sense if you create a fantastic world, like in the *Gilgamesh* film, it is important to establish that [the puppet] has certain functions within that world, so that when further elements of the marvellous happen, you can then move up to that plane, then back off, and then come back down."

Institute Benjamenta: Through the Live Action Looking Glass

In 1995 the Quay Brothers completed their first full-length, live-action feature. *Institute Benjamenta, or This Dream People Call Human Life* received awards at festivals (Locarno and Stockholm), and was released throughout the world. The visual mastery achieved in their animation films is continued in the life-size decors, in the labyrinthian narrative, and in the aesthetic composition within the frame of this live-action film. *Institute Benjamenta* is shot in black and white, enhancing the subtlety of its chiaroscuro effects, and with an animated choreography of light and stark graphics which disorient and captivate audiences. The few animated scenes within the film are isolated interludes, expressions of subjective vision and poetic metaphor. They contribute to the dream-like quality of a work which is, like the Quays' animation films, uncannily free from the laws of time and space.

As with their short films, *Institute Benjamenta* draws its inspiration from fragments and whispers of literary material. The film places a hermetic and ephemeral Baroque cloak over the novella "Jakob von Gunten" and other texts by Robert Walser. The film

Robert Walser, ca. 1909.



Photograph Walser Archive, Zurich

knots a tapestry of myth, choreography, and symbolic and literary reference, located in what critic Jonathan Romney describes as “the fossilized phantom Europe that is the true location of the Quays’ fictions.” Asked about their choice to make a film with live actors, the Quays replied, “It just seemed time to try a new form—just as a composer might think, ‘Now it’s time to do a symphony.’” It is no coincidence that Walser’s writing is often described as being full of musical analogies and metaphors. The stars and sun sing, a room possesses a precious tone, a girl’s gentleness is like a stream of notes; he compared nights to black sounds, someone enjoys his slowness like a melody or a city affects him like a symphony. In Walser’s texts—in his novels, essays, and microgrammes—the compositions and dialogues are reminiscent of musical inspirations, a quality that Walser himself often mentioned.

The images are choreographed to Walser’s musical language. The Quays speak of dance “as a possibility to eliminate dialogue—and why *can’t* a feature film, if carefully done, do the same?” Kim Brandstrup choreographed the students and their forks with a equal intensity (see photo, page 14). The six-week production schedule was itself a choreography of objects, actors, and all involved.

The Quays chose to work with what they call a “lateral heirarchy” of cinematic formal aspects; unlike script- and narrative-driven conventional film,

Institute Benjamenta “cast” the Institute itself before the actors.

We wanted the film to move more in the direction of the fable or the fairy tale (or at least a notion of it), as Walser did obliquely. He didn’t walk in the front door, he—so to speak—came through the roof. So, in order to score something of, as Walser called it, the “senseless but all the same meaningful ‘fairy tale,’” we started by casting the decor as the main actor. We felt that the essential “mysterium” of the film should be the Institute itself, as though it had its own inner life and former existences which seemed to dream upon its inhabitants, and exert its own conspiratorial spell and undertows. That time and space should be ambiguous, that the locale of the film would be less geographical than spiritual, all to score that particularly Walserian half-waking, half-sleeping “world in between.” And, since we’ve always maintained a belief in the illogical . . . the irrational . . . and the obliqueness of poetry, we don’t think exclusively in terms of narrative, but also the “parentheses” that lie hidden behind the narrative.

In a gesture of loyalty to their puppet film aesthetics, the Quays remark that they “treated the actors with as much respect as we treated our puppets.”



Institute Benjamenta

Music from Carl Orff and a lilting riddle divined from a Bavarian folk tale are the aural foreshadowings which accompany the film's exquisitely stylized opening credit graphics and fleeting animated sequences. At dusk, a slightly built man approaches a door, pulls at his heavily starched, blindingly white collar, and hesitatingly knocks. Jakob von Gunten (Mark Ry-lance, from *Prospero's Books* and *Angels and In-sects*), a delicate man who has escaped his upper-class origins and wants "to be of use to someone in this life," enters the Institute Benjamenta, a school for domestics, and embarks on a dream-like voyage through an eerie, metaphysical fairy-tale world, embodied by the Institute itself.

Assisted by her devoted and enigmatic model student Kraus (Daniel Smith), doe-eyed, Victorian-clad Fräulein Lisa Benjamenta (ephemeral Alice Krige, the Borg Queen of recent *Star Trek: First Contact* fame) runs the Institute with her phlegmatic older brother (Fassbinder regular Gottfried John), guiding her students through a lesson which is always the same: "Practice-scenes-from-life"—mechanical repetition, self-castigation, and submission. It is a curriculum of cryptic signs, absurd gestures, and unbearable detail. Jakob's arrival arouses in Herr Benjamenta a haunting hope of a savior, a hope that is rendered more complex by the film's discrete homoerotic undertones. The fragmented and obscure relationships between brother and sister and Kraus are disrupted by Jakob's arrival. His behavior isolates him from the other students; fleeting moments of stifled confession and unarticulated emotion initiate a series of sensual epiphanies in Lisa. Jakob has awakened Walser's

Sleeping Beauty from the loveless existence from which she realizes there is no escape. The hermetic and perhaps incestuous relationship between brother and sister is interrupted by Jakob's presence and his effect on them both.

A sublime foreboding haunts and mystifies the Institute and its inhabitants. Bound up in its suffocating atmosphere, Lisa succumbs to an increasingly horrific recognition of something unspeakable which gnaws at her until she can no longer bear it: a longing born of unfulfilled desire. Lisa's inner decline climaxes in her decision to stop living; she is "dying from those who could have seen and held me . . . dying from the emptiness of cautious and clever people." After a confession to Jakob, sealed with a fleeting brush of her lips on his, she expires. On her bier, while her brother bends in grief over her pale body, Lisa's eyes open once and, unseen by all, sparkle into the camera, a gaze directed at Jakob. She is borne through the Institute's inner chambers, deposited there by her students. Herr Benjamenta leaves the Institute behind and, with Jakob, walks off surrounded by floating flakes in a snowball-glass winter vision. Kraus remains behind, guardian of the fishbowl, the riddle, and the sleeping beauty. He is the constant presence who guarantees that rituals and fossils like the Institute will never fully expire.

Stunning light design endows this film with its ethereal quality. Brief, almost invisible animated sequences punctuate the film and accentuate its fairy-tale environment, suspending time; they are minute and discrete visualizations, reminders of a metaphysical life which slumbers in the Institute. Like Lisa

Benjamenta, the images are simultaneously fragile and immortal. The film evades a postmodern context or interpretation, and its epiphanic moments and dreamscapes provide a momentary orientation, but are themselves even greater enigmas within the film's poetic fabric.

In isolation, the film's leitmotifs and iconography are disturbingly beautiful: totemistic cloven hoofs, deer antlers, flowing waters; in their sublimation and appropriation in a world of suppressed Victorian eroticism, they become obsessive, dark, and ambiguous. Remnants of the Quays wanderings in Walser's Swiss heimat and their Bavarian forays seep into the film's stylization. Lisa's cane, with which she guides and masters her students, is tipped with a tiny hoof (initially the Quays thought to give her cloven shoes); in a close-up at the beginning of the film, when Jakob is brought to Herr Benjamenta's office, we see a hooved foot surreptitiously drawn back out of sight; and later we glimpse Herr Benjamenta out of focus, acting out rutting movements in front of a steam-streaked mirror, with a majestic set of antlers in his arms. And the snowflakes: Walser himself died on Christmas Day during one of his walks in the forest; the forensic photograph shows him face-up on the snow with one arm flung out, his eyes half-open in a frigid, unquiet slumber.

Their recent excursion into feature film with this and future live-action films is by no means an indication of a move away from animation: the Quay Brothers intend to explore the potential hidden in the combination of these cinematic techniques. The formal possibilities inherent in animation can lend visualisation to the dreams, inner vision, and narrative meanderings which are essential components of their cinematic transformations of text, poetry, and imagination. Unlike a novel or poem, whose foundation is the spoken word, the visual potential of cinema allows the bypassing of symbolic written language and the use instead of images with a direct relation to reality. The Quays' films are a collection of original and inspired visual images independent of the viewer's own encounters with the images' source references; the sum total of their films is an excursion into a conjured space of imagination, history, graphics, and pre-Freudian psychology. Most of their films resist narrative interpretation, but their dream-ridden imagery tempts psychoanalytic-theoretical analysis: the automata go through their absurd and obsessive routines; the carefully tended molds and stratifications of dust are tropes which infiltrate the film's rhythm; and the camera's selective shots and focal shifts are a

guide through the architectural impossibilities of subconscious desire. The films stage what otherwise exists only in the form of symbolic language as cryptic or microscript manuscripts, as drawings, or music, perhaps the most mathematical art. The Quays' films give form and substance to memory, inner states, obsession, and thwarted desire.

Their next film project is a live-action feature, *The Mechanical Infanta*. "We project a narrative that a normal automaton can not possibly do, it is more vast and disturbing, darker. It touches on elements of science fiction in the poetic sense, like that of Chris Marker, closer to metafiction, which is a better description of what we want to achieve." The theme of an automaton is embedded in the story of an *amour fou* set in an indeterminate period of the first quarter of the 20th century. The location is a secluded property flanked by the ocean and a forest, in a world where time is stretched. The juxtaposition of imperious logic and alchemy suggested by the project's synopsis is fertile terrain for the Quay Brothers' visual and lyrical imaginations.

Seen as a whole, the Quay Brothers' works are independent of any definable genre; indeed, the imitation of their style which can be observed in films of other animators is a complimentary gesture to the auteur style they have developed. Throughout their opus, a continuity can be observed: the Quays' artistic devotion to the marginal, to the nobody, and the unnoticed, quietly elevated into the sublime. Their films are unbound by time, preferring to investigate what they call "a poetry of shadowy encounters and almost conspiratorial secretness." Whether commissioned or independently produced, the films retain the unique signature which informs their work. "We like going for long walks, metaphorically, into whatever country we go to—we could disappear in any country." On all their wanderings, the Quays continue to pursue their own particular commitment to the Walserian "Beatification of Zero."

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Some of the Quay Brothers' short films, and *Institute Benjamenta*, are available from Zeitgeist Films, in New York City.